

Prayer of the Faithful

The final part of the Liturgy of the Word in the Roman Missal that demands our attention is commonly known as the Prayer of the Faithful. If you open up your Roman Missal to the Order of Mass, paragraph 20, it actually says this in the rubrics for the Missal, after the Nicene or Apostles Creed, either one, is recited or sung, #20 says this:

Then follows *the Universal Prayer*, that is *the Prayer of the Faithful* or Bidding Prayers.¹

Okay, now notice once again the Missal uses several names for the same part of the Mass, because they'll get different names over time. The first name, Universal Prayer, emphasizes that this part of the Mass is going to be a prayer for all people, a prayer for all men. So it's universal in its scope. The second name, Prayer of the Faithful, is going to emphasize who is making this Universal Prayer? In other words, this is the part of the Mass that is specifically tied to the role of the faithful as intercessors for all of humanity. We'll come back and we'll look at that a little bit more. And then finally, the Bidding Prayers is an old name tied in particular to the Church of Rome and its Roman liturgy as it was celebrated in England, and it emphasizes the intercessory character of the prayer. Like if I bid someone do something, I'm asking them to do it. And in in England, you may have heard of the bidding of the beads. It was actually a way of describing saying the rosary, for example. In other words, you're making certain intercessory prayers using prayer beads in order to count them. So the Bidding Prayers, almost nobody calls it that that I've ever met, but that is one of the official names for this part of the Mass in the Liturgy of the Word.

So that's a very brief description of it in the Mass itself, in the Order of Mass. But if you go back to the Instruction on the Mass at the beginning of the Roman Missal, commonly called the *General Instruction of the Roman Missal*, paragraph 70 gives a little more detail about this part of the Mass. And I'm just going to read the description here — actually paragraph 69 and 70 — because it's helpful,

¹ Roman Missal, *The Order of Mass*, no. 20.

because this is a part of the Mass that not a lot of people understand very well, and I want to make sure we're clear about what role it plays? So it says this, the Universal Prayer, the Church teaches in the Instruction quote:

In the Universal Prayer or Prayer of the Faithful, the people respond in some sense to the Word of God which they have received in faith and, *exercising the office of their baptismal Priesthood, offer prayers to God for the salvation of all.* (GIRM no. 69) It is desirable that there usually be such a form of prayer in Masses celebrated with the people, so that petitions may be offered for holy Church, for those who govern with authority over us, for those weighed down by various needs, for all humanity, and for the salvation of the whole world.

And in paragraph 70 it actually says:

The series of intentions is usually to be:

- a) for the needs of the Church;
- b) for public authorities and the salvation of the whole world;
- c) for those burdened by any kind of difficulty;
- d) for the local community. (GIRM no. 70)

So that's kind of the norm for what topics should be covered or addressed in the Universal Prayer, in the Prayer of the Faithful. All right, so that's the description of the Prayer of the Faithful in the Roman Missal/. Where does that come from? Where is that in Sacred Scripture, and where is that in Sacred Tradition, especially in the Roman tradition? Well, in this case, the scriptural roots of the Universal Prayer, or Prayer of the Faithful, is very explicit. It's from the letter of St. Paul, his First Letter to Timothy. In 1 Timothy 2 we actually have a very important description, in chapters 2 and 3, of the liturgy in the Pauline Church, with specific emphasis on the various orders and ranks within the liturgy. So Paul talks about the office of Bishop, he talks about the office of Deacon. He'll actually talk about presbyters elsewhere in 1 Timothy. And in 1 Timothy 2 he is describing the kind of

prayer that the men and women who have gathered, the faithful, are to offer. And this is what he says:

First of all, then, *I urge that supplications, prayers, intercessions, and thanksgivings be made for all men,*² *for kings and all who are in high positions, that we may lead a quiet and peaceable life, godly and respectful in every way.*³ This is good, and it is acceptable in the sight of God our Savior,⁴ who desires all men to be saved and to come to the knowledge of the truth.⁵ For there is one God, and there is one mediator between God and men, the man Christ Jesus,⁶ who gave himself as a ransom for all...⁷ For this I was appointed a preacher and apostle (I am telling the truth, I am not lying), a teacher of the Gentiles in faith and truth.⁸ *I desire then that in every place the men should pray, lifting holy hands without anger or quarreling;*⁹ also that women should adorn themselves modestly and sensibly in seemly apparel, not with braided hair or gold or pearls or costly attire¹⁰ but by good deeds, as befits women who profess religion.² (1 Timothy 2:1-10)

Now I read the whole quote there because I want you to see that context. The key line here is Paul saying:

*I urge that supplications, prayers, intercessions, and thanksgivings be made for all men,*² *for kings and all who are in high positions, that we may lead a quiet and peaceable life, godly and respectful in every way.*

Including who? Kings and rulers. Why? Well, think about the context here. In 1 Timothy, Paul's writing to Timothy. Well, actually in 1 and 2 Timothy, he's writing to this young bishop at a time of persecution. In fact, in 2 Timothy, Paul is going to talk about the fact that he's in prison, that he's in chains, that he's about to be sacrificed, that his life is about to be poured out. And so, at the very time when the church is beginning to face some persecution from the king and various governors,

² Unless otherwise indicated, all Bible citations/quotations herein are from *The Holy Bible: Revised Standard Version, Catholic Edition*. New York: National Council of Churches of Christ in the USA, 1994.

right? And who is the king? Who is the emperor at this time? It's Nero, who was one of the worst persecutors of the Church in the history of the Church. What is Paul saying? I want everywhere for people to pray, supplications, petitions, thanksgivings, and intercession be made for everyone, including the emperor, including kings, including those who are in high positions. Why? Why would I pray for Caesar Nero? The guy's wicked. He actually burned Christians at the stake. He lit their bodies on fire, according to one account, to light his gardens, right? He used them for lamps. I mean, this guy was sadistic. He was evil. He was demonic. He was, he was mad, actually. I mean, there was all kinds of stories about the madness of Nero, but he was an enemy of the Church.

So why would Paul encourage Christians everywhere to pray, even for the Emperor? Well, because God desires all men to be saved and to come to a knowledge of the truth, and Christ Jesus gave himself as a ransom for all. In other words, Christ didn't just die for members of the Church. He died for everyone. He died for the pagans. He died for Nero. He died for the emperor. He is a universal savior, and his blood was poured out to cover the sins of all men, not just a select few. So the universal character of Christ's sacrificial death is the warrant for the universal character of the intercessions of the Church, right, whenever it gathers in prayer.

And you can see here that Paul isn't just talking about ministers in the church, because he describes men and women praying in the liturgical assembly. So he's talking about the faithful here too. He wants everyone in the Church to pray for everyone in the world through these intercessions, both men and women praying for everyone, both believers and unbelievers, Jew and Gentile, because Christ gave himself as a ransom for all. That's the context of that statement. So, once you understand that universal scope of the Church's prayer as taught by the Apostle Paul, you can turn back to the liturgy of the Roman Church and you'll begin to understand the function of the Universal Prayer in the Roman liturgy. So, for example, if we look at tradition, once again we have to keep going back to St. Justin Martyr. I can't help it. I'm sorry, I don't mean to quote him over and over again, but he's the earliest witness to the Roman liturgy, and he tells us in his *First Apology* about the place of the Prayer of the Faithful. So when describing the Mass, he says this quote:

In this way we may offer prayer in common both for ourselves and for those who have received illumination and for people everywhere...

We pray for ourselves, we pray for all the baptized, those who ever seemed illumination, and for people everywhere.

When the prayers have concluded, we greet one another with a kiss.

And elsewhere, he actually says:

...All stand up together and offer prayers, as I said before, when we have concluded our prayer, bread is brought forward...³

So he has two descriptions in his apology to the Prayer of the Faithful. Everyone stands up, and then altogether they pray in common for the Church and for the world, and for everyone. And this is a part of the liturgy in Rome, according to St. Justin Martyr.

Now, if we fast forward a few centuries in the tradition, we actually see an example of this in a famous document called *The Gelasian Decretals*. So this is a description of the liturgy that is associated with Pope St. Gelasius I. Gelasius was the Pope in Rome in the 5th century AD and he was a very prominent liturgical reformer. We don't have tons of detail on exactly what actions he took in his revisions and reforms of the Roman liturgy. We don't have as much as we have as for later popes like St. Gregory the Great, but there's a list of these decretals that were discovered and were associated with him and with the Roman liturgy at his time. And they actually give us a kind of window into an ancient version of the Prayer of the Faithful in the Roman liturgy. Now I'm going to read this; you will notice that these intercessory prayers are also fused with the refrain, Lord have mercy...Lord have mercy...Lord have mercy, which we tend to associate with the *Kyrie Eleison*, the penitential act at the beginning of Mass. But that refrain would actually appear in different parts of the Mass in different places. So it's a little bit

³ Justin Martyr, *1 Apology* 65, 67. In Johnson, *Worship in the Early Church*, 1:67, 68.

of variety here. But notice, watch the content of the Prayer of the Faithful in the Gelasian Decretals. Here is an ancient window into the liturgy. It says this:

a. Let all say: *Lord, hear us and have mercy.*

b. *For the faithful* we call upon the Father of the Only-Begotten, and the Son of God who begets, and God the Holy Spirit.

Kyrie eleison.

1. For the stainless Church of the living God, the Church established throughout the whole world

+we request the riches of divine goodness+

Kyrie eleison.

And you could substitute, if you want a kind of modern analogy, we'll say as a refrain: "Lord, hear our prayer...Lord, Hear our prayer." Or "Hear us, o Lord." That's how the refrains function. It keeps going:

5. For pious rulers and all their attendants, who love justice and right judgment

+we implore the power of the Lord+

Kyrie eleison.

6. For agreeable weather, for suitable rain, for gentle and refreshing winds, and for a favorable change of seasons

+we entreat the Lord, the ruler of the world+

Kyrie eleison.

9. For those disquieted by the necessity of traveling and for those oppressed by the power of evil or hostility

+we pray to our Lord and Savior+

Kyrie eleison.

And then finally, this is interesting:

14. *For the souls of the faithful departed*, especially the souls of the Lord's holy priests who here presided over the Catholic Church, that they may obtain rest

+we entreat the Lord of spirits and the judge of all flesh+
*Kyrie eleison.*⁴

So that translation is from Johnson's collection of *Worship in the Early Church*. So notice what you see there, prayers for the Church, prayers for rulers, prayers for particular difficulties people might have, whether through the seasons or traveling or people oppressed by evil or hostility. So whatever difficulties they might have, and then finally also for the souls of the faithful departed. That's another element of these early prayers of the faithful. Notice here what this says in the Gelasian Decretals. It doesn't say let the minister say or let the presbyter say or let the priest say. It says "let all say." So what we have here is all of the assembly praying together for these various petitions, praying these various petitions and intercessions together. And that's why you'll see it referred to as Prayer of the Faithful. It's not just a private prayer of the minister, it's a collective prayer of the people. Just like Justin says, we all stand, rise together and pray.

Okay, now again, there's so many things that could be discussed here. For various reasons, about which scholars will debate and speculate, the Prayer of the Faithful, this universal intercessory prayer, is going to drop out of the Roman liturgy for a long time. It will still pop up from here to there, in various formats of the Bidding Prayers. You will see it in some English forms of the liturgy. You'll see it in various local celebrations of the liturgy in Europe, but in the Roman liturgy, especially the official Missals of the Papal Court of Innocent III in the 13th century, this part of the liturgy is going to be omitted. However, it is very ancient and you can actually see vestiges of it in the Roman liturgy in one key place. So if you look at the ancient liturgy of the Easter Vigil with Good Friday, you will see these kinds of intercessions as part of the liturgy even to this day. So for example, you may have noticed — let me take out the Roman Missal here — if you look at the Good Friday liturgy, one of the things in the Good Friday liturgy that makes it so long is all of these intercessions where we will stand to pray and then kneel. You might remember this from the liturgy. So if you look at the solemn Good Friday liturgy, for example, I'm going to list here, we will intercede:

⁴ *The Deprecatio Gelasii* 1-2, 5-6, 8-9, 13-14. In Johnson, *Worship in the Early Church*, 3:155.

1. For the Holy Church.
2. For the Pope.
3. For all orders and degrees of the faithful.
4. For catechumens.
5. For the unity of Christians.
6. For the Jewish people.
7. For those who do not believe in Christ.
8. For those who do not believe in God.
9. For those in public office.
10. For those in tribulation (e.g., disease, hunger, prisons, travelers, sick, dying).⁵

For those who are suffering. So those categories of intercessions for the Good Friday liturgy, which is based on some very ancient liturgical practices of the Roman Church, is a kind of vestige, so to speak, of the Prayer of the Faithful in the Roman liturgy, which is going to drop out of the ordinary Sunday Mass for many centuries. So all the way pp to the Second Vatican Council, if you look, for example, at the Missal of the Council of Trent, or if you look at the Missal of St. John XXIII, the 1962 version before the Council, the the Prayer of the Faithful is not part of the liturgy. But with the Second Vatican Council., one of the things it explicitly called to be restored were the Prayer of the Faithful, the Universal Prayer, as part of the Roman Liturgy. And so in the contemporary Roman Missal, the Prayer of the Faithful, or Universal Prayer is in fact part of the liturgy. It's not just an optional thing, it is actually something that's part of the Liturgy of the Word. In fact, it in a sense brings the Liturgy of the Word to its consummation or to its final *telos*, because after we've heard the Gospel, both proclaimed and explained, responded with faith, then the faithful, and this is important, exercise their baptismal priesthood by interceding for the Church, for themselves, and for the whole world.

What does that mean, the baptismal priesthood? Well, it's very crucial to note that in the New Testament, it is not just Christ who is described as a priest. And it's not

⁵ Roman Missal, *Friday of the Passion of the Lord*, nos. 11-13.

even just ministers, like the Apostles or bishops or elders who are described in priestly categories. It is the lay faithful, everyone who is baptized belongs not to the ministerial priesthood that offers the Body and Blood of Christ in the Eucharist, who consecrates the bread and wine, but the baptismal priesthood who offer spiritual sacrifices of their prayers, their sufferings, their intercessions for their families, for themselves, and for the whole world. If you want just an example of this, probably the easiest passage to point to is actually from 1 Peter, the First Letter of St. Peter 2:4:

Come to him, to that living stone, rejected by men but in God's sight chosen and precious; and like living stones be yourselves built into a spiritual house, to be a holy priesthood, to offer spiritual sacrifices acceptable to God through Jesus Christ. (1 Peter 2:4-5)

If you skip down to verse nine, he says:

you are a chosen race, a royal priesthood, a holy nation, God's own people, that you may declare the wonderful deeds of him who called you out of darkness into his marvelous light.

This is important. Sometimes after the Protestant Reformation, Catholics will think that the idea of a priesthood of all believers is a Protestant notion. And that's because certain Protestants, like Martin Luther, took that idea and weaponized it and used it against the ministerial priesthood. They pitted the priesthood of the baptized against the priesthood of ministers and tried to argue that because everyone was a baptismal priest, there should be no ordained priesthood, right? It was an attack on the ordained priesthood. But that's not what St. Peter is doing. But there is a grain of truth to that attack, namely that although there is a ministerial priesthood to offer the sacrifice of the Mass, that does not mean there isn't a baptismal priesthood.

And what does the baptismal priesthood offer? "[S]piritual sacrifices acceptable to God through Jesus Christ." Why? Because they are "a royal priesthood," the people of God. "God's own people." Again, that's a very important term from Vatican II, the people of God. I once had a student who said, "Dr. Pitre, you

shouldn't use the people of God. That's a Protestant idea." I was like, "Wow, that's fascinating. I guess St. Peter was a Protestant because in 1 Peter 2, he calls the church the people of God." It's actually a biblical expression from 1 Peter. But if you think of 1 Peter as the first papal encyclical, it, like many other papal encyclicals, has suffered the fate of no one reading it. Okay, people tend to ignore 1 and 2 Peter, but they're very, very important letters in the New Testament. They provide an important theology of the Church and a theology of the baptismal priesthood. So, just as St. Peter himself is telling the laity that they are a priesthood to offer spiritual sacrifices, so too in the Roman liturgy to this day, the Prayer of the Faithful, the Universal Prayer, is where the laity in particular exercise that baptismal priesthood by interceding, not just for themselves and for the Church and for people who are sick or who are suffering, or for whatever particular needs the local church may have, but for the salvation of the whole world. Because that is the role of the faithful, the baptized faithful are to be apostles to the world. There's a lay apostolate to bring the good news, the light and salvation to the whole world, and they exercise that in a special way in this Universal Prayer.

Before we move into the kind of spiritual significance of what's happening at this moment in the Mass, I just want to make two practical points about the Prayer of the Faithful. The first one is this, that if you look at the Church's teaching on the Prayer of the Faithful in the General Instruction, in paragraph 71, it says that:

It is for the priest celebrant to direct this prayer from the chair. He himself begins it with a brief introduction, by which he invites the faithful to pray, and likewise he concludes it with a prayer.

But it says this:

The intentions announced should be sober, be composed freely but prudently, and be succinct, and they should express the prayer of the entire community.⁶

So in other words, notice here what the General Instruction envisages here is prayers that are composed in advance, right? So they are not just extemporaneous.

⁶ *General Instruction of the Roman Missal*, no. 71.

They should be concise, so they need to have a few words, but they also need to be expressive of the prayer of the entire community. So in other words, I've seen this happen, and it's unfortunate, but they shouldn't be a place where partisan views or particular petitions that might not be shared by the entire congregation are introduced into the liturgy, which would be a moment for distraction and disunity rather than collective union of prayer of all the people. So one of the duties of the priest is to oversee and to regulate what the content of the Prayer of the Faithful is going to be for that particular Mass. Although it is very clear that the intentions can be concerned with particular occasions or with particular issues that might be faced by the local church. So think here, for example, in my own context, like in the wake of a hurricane or on the cusp of a hurricane, it would be very fitting for the Prayer of the Faithful to pray for protection from loss of life or property on the cusp of an impending storm, right? Because prayer for good weather is something that's part of the ancient Roman tradition. We saw it in the Gelasian Decretals, but if you want an idea of some examples, the Roman Missal actually has a really helpful appendix; it's Appendix 5 that gives some examples of formulas for the Universal Prayer. So there's a general formula, and then it gives intentions that you can use as a model that the priest or a diocese could use as a model for the development of these specific petitions. You might be wondering, what are we supposed to be saying? So, for example, the priest can introduce the prayer in this way:

To God the Father almighty, dear brothers and sisters, may every prayer of our heart be directed, for his will it is that all humanity should be saved and come to the knowledge of the truth.⁷

You see there, the priest is actually quoting in part, alluding to 1 Timothy 2, the words of St. Paul. That's almost a direct quote. And then the intentions, it gives four of them, just like in the norms. And it says things like this:

1. For the holy Church of God, that the Lord may graciously watch over her and care for her, let us pray to the Lord.
- R. Grant this, almighty God.

⁷ Roman Missal, Appendix V.

2. For the peoples of all the world, that the Lord may graciously preserve harmony among them, let us pray to the Lord.

R. Grant this, almighty God.

3. For all who are oppressed by any kind of need, that the Lord may graciously grant them relief, let us pray to the Lord.

R. Grant this, almighty God.

4. For ourselves and our own community, that the Lord may graciously receive us as a sacrifice acceptable to himself, let us pray to the Lord.

R. Grant this, almighty God.

And then the priest can conclude by saying something like:

O God, our refuge and our strength, hear the prayers of your Church, for you yourself are the source of all devotion, and grant, we pray, that what we ask in faith we may truly obtain. Through Christ our Lord.

R. Amen.

And there are other general formulas as well in the Missal. A second general formula which is more detailed. It goes through things like praying:

“for the whole Christian people...for those who do not yet believe...for those who hold public office...for favorable weather and abundant fruits from the earth.”

Wow, that sounds a lot like the Gelasian Decretals from the 5th century.

“For our brothers and sisters who cannot be present...for the repose of the souls of the faithful departed...”

Almost verbatim from the Gelasian Decretals.

“For all of us who pray in faith and ask mercy of the Lord...For ourselves and those close to us...let us call upon the mercy of Christ the Lord.”

And after each one of these we hear the refrain, “Christ hear us” or “Christ, graciously hear us.” So the refrains can be varied in the Missal. And then they'll also give examples of the Prayer of the Faithful for different seasons, such as Advent. So you might have specific Prayer of the Faithful for Advent. Christmas time, there's all kinds of examples here. Prayers for Lent, Easter, Holy Week, Ordinary Time. So whenever these prayers are being composed — the Mass of the Dead — the Church has given us specific prayers that we can pray, not just guidelines, but even just to utilize these examples from the official Roman Missal itself. So I just highlight that so that you can kind of see how the Prayer of the Faithful should function in the liturgy according to the Missal.

In closing, then, if we ask, “well what's happening at this part of the liturgy?” The answer is quite simple. When we pray the Prayer of the Faithful, the Universal Prayer, we are fulfilling the command of St. Paul himself in 1 Timothy. And you can actually see this in the official teaching of the Catholic Church in the Catechism of the Catholic Church, paragraph 1349, the Church teaches, and I quote:

After the homily, which is an exhortation to accept this Word as what it truly is, the Word of God, and to put it into practice, *come the intercessions for all men, according to the Apostle's words:* “I urge that supplications, prayers, intercessions, and thanksgivings be made for all men, for kings, and all who are in high positions.” (1 Tim 2:12) (CCC 1349)

So when we pray the Prayer of the Faithful, what we're doing there is an evangelistic act, but also a priestly act, in the sense that we're interceding. It's very interesting that the very passage where Paul commands the faithful to pray for all men is the passage where he says there's one mediator between God and man, Christ Jesus. Because it's precisely as the mystical body of Christ that when we intercede for our needs and for the needs of the whole world, Christ Himself is acting as mediator through His Mystical Body and interceding with the Father for the salvation of all through the Liturgy of the Church.